21. Shen Tsung-ch'ien (paintings dated 1745-1793) 沈宗骞

"Living in the Mountains" 1786

Hanging scroll, ink on paper
117 x 40 cm.

Inscription:

"I wasn't born in the mountains but I have a passionate love for them, and in particular paint the green peaks. The elegant color of some is delectable, like the Milky Way beneath dew or the Han River white in autumn. Moist dew touches places and washes the autumn colors, which are clear like the wide-spreading blue waters of Lake Tung-ting. Hibiscus fills the scene, with the heavens illuminated by their clear deep color. Others are like flying dragons, coming from beyond the borders of heaven, with scales and mane arrayed in rows, protruding like frozen spears. Distant isles are vague, separated by mist, with cool river and humid clouds kingfisher-blue. Mourning over events of the past, I travel to visit the Three Mountains. I also think of sailing to a place of mystery, such as 'the forbidden stream' (i.e., the Peach Blossom Spring), located I know not where, or 'returning home' to within the mountains or living as a Taoist immortal with a purple silk hat on Mount Peng, the road to which has cinnabar cliffs dotted with plum blossoms.

I lodge this in writing, at peace among the pine and bamboo, not jealous of Lao-tzu for having come later. During the sixth lunar month of summer of the year 1786, by (Shen) Tsung-ch'ien.

Artist's seals:

Liu-ch'ih Chai (before inscription); Shen Tsung-ch'ien yin and Chiah-chou (both after inscription);
Yen-uan Lao-pu (in lower left)

Although small in size, the scale of the painting is vast, with several villas set along a stream in a mountain valley dwarfed by the imposing peaks rising above. These are composed abstractly, with small units of standard size repeated to build up forms which are then overlapped to create the complex ranges that seem connected by invisible currents of energy. The brushwork also unifies the various parts of the composition for it too appears in a limited range of textures and tonalities. The goal of the artist would seem to have been the creation of a maximum degree of richness through the disciplined application of a restricted number of brush-types and pictorial forms. He himself analyzed pictorial composition in the following terms: "It would be a great fault to begin a picture without a preconceived plan, and then add and adjust as one goes along, with the result that the different parts do not have an organic unity. One should rather have a general idea of where the masses and connections, the light and dark areas would be, then proceed so that one part grows out of another, and the light and dark areas co-operate to build a picture. Examined closely, each section is interesting in itself; taken together there is an organic unity. From the top to the bottom, all the misty woods and villages on the plains are interrelated, and are united by one general movement or gesture. It is thus compact but not crowded, airy but not loosely constructed, so natural, like something cast, that one could not add to it or take away from it without loss. This is the composition technique of the ancients."1

Shen Tsung-ch'ien was born in Wu-ch'eng, the modern city of Hu-chou in Chekiang province, a descendant of Shen Yen (1566-1638), who served in Nanjing as Minister of the Ministry of Justice. Although Shen Tsung-ch'ien earned the first or lowest literary degree, and became well-known as a scholar and calligrapher he seems to have earned his living as a professional painter. A major portion of his book on the art of painting, the Chiah-chou Hsiu-hua Pien, is devoted to portraiture and to figure painting in general, with technical observations that suggest intimate knowledge of the professional's craft.

"In the beginning," according to his biography in the Mo-lin Chih-hua of 1871, "he travelled throughout Wu and Yueh (i.e. Kiangsu and Chekiang provinces) by means of his calligraphy and painting, with a refinement equal to his high reputation."2 A good many paintings from this period are figure paintings, including portraits, and it is likely that Shen was travelling in search of..."

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especially flower painting—by his grandmother, Ch'en Shu (1660-1736), who also taught Chang Keng (1685-1760), author of one of the earliest biographies of Ch'tien.¹ By 1738, the year in which he earned his second-level chu-jen degree, Ch'tien was married, and in the following year a daughter was born to the young student. After passing a special examination in 1742, Ch'tien was appointed secretary in the Grand Secretariat. Passing the top-level chin-shih examination in 1745 as first in his class, the already accomplished scholar was appointed a Hanlin compiler of the first class. It was likely at this time that Ch'tien met and studied landscape painting with Tung Pang-ta (1699-1769), who was appointed sub-chancellor of the Grand Secretariat in 1747. During the following twenty years, the two men, who both based their painting styles on that of Wang Yuan-ch'i, would frequently serve in the same or related government ministries.

Only five extant or recorded paintings can be associated with Ch'tien's career before 1750, the year of the earliest dated poem written by the Ch'tien-lung emperor on any painting by the artist. From that year onward, when Ch'tien was likely attached to the Inner Palace, the artist was often called upon to commemorate the military triumphs of his emperor in paintings, to create landscape and flower-and-bird compositions in accord with poems composed by the ruler, and to accompany the emperor on his travels in order to record the sites and delights of those journeys. No fewer than 150 hanging scrolls, 75 handscrolls, 67 albums, and 72 fans by Ch'tien are recorded in the various catalogues of the imperial collection and roughly one-quarter remain today in the Palace Museum collections in Taipei and Beijing.

The continuing progress of Ch'tien's official career gives added point to those numbers, for his official duties left him little time to paint save at imperial command. Between 1757 and 1761 Ch'tien served as vice-president of the Board of Works, and between 1761 and his death in 1772 he was vice-president of the Board of Punishments. In addition to holding these major positions, Ch'tien also officiated over several provincial and metropolitan examinations, served as Director of Education in Chekiang province, and acted as imperial emissary to Kueichow province.

The present painting, done by Ch'tien Wei-ch'eng during a rare period of leisure from his duties, was based on a painting by Wang Yuan-ch'i owned by Yu Ming-chung (1714-1779), serving then as president of the Board of Revenue and one of the emperor's most valued advisors. Created for Ch'tien's own pleasure, and thus a rarity among his extant works, the painting was then presented by him to a younger brother, perhaps Ch'tien Wei-chiao (1739-1806), who was also a noteworthy artist. The colophons added between 1774 and 1811 were written by those who had known Ch'tien Wei-ch'eng personally, many having served as fellow officials and some even related to him, and the work thus serves to evoke the full context in which this painting was created for private pleasure rather than public display.


cont. of cat. 21: Shen Tsung-ch'ien

commissions. His "Portrait of Chang Tung and Son" (figure 1), done in 1758, probably in Hangchou, bears colophons by such luminaries as Chi Shao-nan (1706-1768), Hang Shih-chun (1696-1773), Ting Ching (1695-1765), and Cheng Haieh (1693-1765). Shen's skill in figure painting was in fact emphasized in his short biography given in the late 18th century Ts'u-hua Sui-pi: "He is good at painting courtly ladies and is especially skilled in the pai-niao monochrome style. During his middle years he concentrated on landscapes..." By that time Shen was married and living in a house described in the Mo-lin Chin-haia: "...He lived on Yen-shan Bay in Wu-ch'eng and called himself The Old Gardener of Yen Stream. His thatched house of several rooms was surrounded by water and bamboo, had paper windows and wooden couches, and was lined with paintings and books just like the retreat of a scholarly recluse..."

Although landscapes do constitute a majority of Shen's later paintings, he continued to do figure paintings, especially those based on early literature. Among the most interesting of these are Shen's versions of the "Nymph of the Lo River" (figures 2-3). An account of this theme was given in Kukodo Journal III (Spring, 1997), in a discussion of a painting done in 1847 by Fei Tan-hsia (1802-1850), and a series of nearly identical versions of the theme by Fei was discussed in Kukodo Journal V (Autumn, 1997). In the present issue an article by James Cahill discusses the possible meaning and function of such paintings, which seem to have

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been particularly popular from the 17th century onward. Shen Tsung-ch'ien's contributions to the evolution of this theme should also be noted, especially his version done after Li Kung-lin, which was engraved in stone by Hsin T'ao-k'ai and thus available for wide circulation through rubbings. Although it cannot be shown that Fei T'ao-hsu saw either a painting or a rubbing based on a painting of this subject by Shen Tsung-ch'ien, Fei did write a colophon in 1839 on a 12-leaf album by Shen depicting courtly ladies, and this could well have included the "Nymph of the Lo River."  
Many decades of experience with and thought about the practice of painting provided the back-
ground for Shen’s Chieh-chou Hsieh-hua Pien, the preface of which is dated to 1781. Standing today as one of the most complete, coherent, and articulate of all treatises written in China on painting, his work is also a passionate defence of the conservative view of painting, one which takes even the great Wang Hui to task for having on occasion betrayed that cause: “He was well educated, and brought up in the orthodox tradition. His work can be compared with that of ancient artists; at his best he can stand in the company of the Sung and Yuan masters. But the paintings he made for his ignorant admirers often bordered on pretty, showy brushwork. That is not what we would expect from a master. That is why so few of his works are good... He is an example of one who tried to please the public and forgot the principles.” The issues of artistic motivation and aesthetic control were important to Shen, and his eloquent discussions are frequently given a moral cast, where the character of the artist become of great import: “Many of those who look at art do not really understand it. They decry the orthodox style, and praise those who follow the vogue of the day. The struggling artist who does not stand on his own is easily tempted to go with the crowd. One never can tell how it will all end. Some have a regular training under good masters and have a good grounding in technique, but because of special preferences, or for the sake of making a living, begin to submit but with a bad conscience, and end up by defending their tendencies. Thus they find themselves very popular and famous. But the moment they die, their work fades with them. They bathe in popular applause and bury their own high talent. It is as if these people worked their hearts out to please a public, only to be ignored by those who truly understand art. What difference then is there between an artist and a house painter or one who makes coloured festoons for a living? One must always keep in mind what a painting is and try not to forget it and strive to perfect oneself, and in this way come near to the great masters.” It would seem that little has changed in the two hundred or so years since Shen wrote.

3. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 182-183.

cont. of cat. 22: Miao Sung
by masts and sails, which are moored just beyond. A sheer cliff rises above, atop which stands the drinking pavilion. The artist’s self-deprecating inscription refers to his inability to depict accurately the proportions of the compositional elements but it is his conscious manipulation of pictorial space that gives this painting life and accounts for its great appeal.

Miao Sung, from Ch’ang-chou, the modern Suchou in Kiangsu province, was born into a family with a long tradition of interest in scholarship and collecting. His great-grandfather, Miao Yueh-tsao (1682-1761), a chin-shih degree-holder who served as court librarian, was famed for his connoisseurship of calligraphy and painting, which is readily apparent in his 1733 publication Yiu-i Lu. Miao Sung was skilled in writing poetry but it was for his unusual style of painting that he became famous.

His teacher was Wang Chiu (paintings dated 1754-1800), a great-grandson of Wang Hui (see catalogue 15), a student of Huang Ting, and one of the so-called Four Lesser Wangs (see catalogue 19). Miao was thus trained in the orthodox tradition of painting and acclaimed by Wang Hsieh-hao (1754-1832), his contemporary and a major artist within that tradition. Miao was of a relatively independent nature, however, as can be seen from the names he used on the seals of the present painting, the style of which departs in many ways from his received heritage.

Miao Sung’s evocative and compelling paintings earned him great fame in the capital. Very early in the 19th century Miao accompanied an official envoy to the Liu-ch’iu or Ryuky Islands, most likely the 1800-1802 mission sent to confirm the accession of a new king to the throne of the islands. After his return, Miao’s “poetry became increasingly free and undisciplined and his paintings even freer and less fettered,” according to his biography in the Mo-lin Ch’un-hua. The same source also noted: “In the past, when his mental illness flared up, he would act mad with no restraint. He too considered himself crazy. His inscriptions were signed abruptly, ‘Crazy Sung.’ It might seem tempting to see in the present painting, with its tension-filled and unstable composition, evidence of a comparable instability in the artist, but that notion is belied by the great technical control.